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Henry Brandon: A question of covert action

While the intelligence committees of Congress are preparing for hearings on the limitations of covert operations as part of a new charter for the Central Intelligence Agency, major "leaks" about current covert operations occurred in the press that many high officials say are highly embarrassing to the United States.

The "leaks" indicated that the CIA had been instructed to supply arms to the Afghan rebel tribesmen resisting the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan. The stories included such details as these: that the arms were mostly of Russian origin, that the operation began in mid-

January and that the arms were funneled into Afghanistan through Pakistan. It gave them considerable authenticity.

It was not surprising that the Soviet press prominently displayed those reports, which confirmed earlier Soviet allegations that the United States was supplying arms to Afghan rebels. Since the Soviet government had said that its troops would only be withdrawn once the reason for their presence no longer existed, these reports furnished an excuse to keep them there indefinitely. It was for this reason that

there was consternation among leading State Department officials about the "leaks."

At the senior level of the National Security Council, it was a report in *The New York Times* that elicited a denial, stating that no senior White House official or NSC official had been the source of the article as it had claimed. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the president's national security adviser, went further by saying that no one on his staff had spoken to the correspondent who wrote the story.

I have no idea who actually "leaked" the report, but such leaks usually occur with a purpose behind them, and it may be interesting to speculate on the reasons.

Perhaps the most likely reason has international as well as domestic overtones. The source may have felt that it was important for the United States to prove to the world, and to Americans, that it is doing more than is apparent on the surface to counter the Soviet lurch into Afghanistan — and to assure the rebels that they would not be left to themselves if they carried on their fight.

It may also have been designed to remind the Rus-

sians that they will not have an easy time in Afghanistan and that the United States can do what the Soviet Union did when it openly supplied arms to the insurgents in Vietnam. This Russian aid was part of the reason the United States failed to win that war.

In Afghanistan it would appear that the shoe is on the other foot. The Russians will have to face the fact that as long as they try to impose their own puppet on the Afghans, they will not be able to pacify the country and face continued guerrilla warfare.

In this connection the official announcement by the Egyptian ministry of defense that Egypt had undertaken to train Afghan guerrillas was most unusual and added to the puzzlement about what would normally have been considered another covert operation.

This boast may have been designed to hearten Afghan guerrillas but, above all, to show the world that Egypt is now able to fulfill a useful military role in support of American policy in the region and that there exists some sort of coordination with United States policy. As an afterthought, this not-so-covert operation might also help to impress Congress

when it comes to consider Egypt's request for substantial new arms aid.

The leak could also have been prompted by those quarters who generally disapprove of the United States indulging in covert operations, and since Brzezinski belongs to those who have advocated covert operations, there may have been a purposeful desire to point an accusing finger at him. There have been some heated arguments within the Carter administration as to whether and to what extent covert operations should be undertaken.

Therefore, if confusion and bitter complaints exist in some quarters about the leaks, it can only be an indication that there is disagreement within the administration as to whether these covert operations are likely to facilitate the strategy for a negotiated solution — including the establishment of a neutral supervisory commission to be placed along the Pakistani-Afghanistan border, as President Carter suggested.

It also raises the question whether the United States can conduct covert operations on the scale of supplying arms to Afghan rebels without their becoming public knowledge.

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